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ABSTRACT

This paper was developed for the Illinois State Board of Education as part of a year long project to address the issue of personnel shortages in special education. Recommendations from a number of state committees and professional organizations were analyzed and additional input obtained from various professionals in regular and special education. A conceptual framework regarding an effective system for personnel recruitment and retention is first presented. This framework stresses that any such system must be data driven and have the following five elements: (1) permanence, (2) flexibility, (3) responsiveness, (4) comprehensiveness, and (5) integration. A proposed system for special education personnel recruitment and retention is then described. This system addresses the components of data collection/analysis, marketing/recruitment, training/certification, professional support/enhancement. Specific recommendations regarding the implementation of these components are provided. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/DB)

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PERSONNEL RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: MEETING THE CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper was developed for the Illinois State Board of Education as part of a year long project to address the issue of personnel shortages in special education. Recommendations from a number of state committees and professional organizations were analyzed and additional input obtained from various professionals in regular and special education. A conceptual framework regarding an effective system for personnel recruitment and retention is first presented. A proposed system for special education personnel recruitment and retention is then described. This system addresses the components of data colletion/analysis, marketing/recruitment, training/certification, professional support/enhancement. Specific recommendations regarding the implementation of these components are provided.

PERSONNEL RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Introduction

In Illinois, as in most other states, the lack of adequately trained and certificated staff is a serious and formidable barrier to providing appropriate services to students with disabilities. In some instances, enough graduates are produced, but many choose not to stay in the field, or to change states, or to work in settings other than the public schools.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (1989) reported that personnel shortages in special education can be expected to reach "crisis proportions" in the coming years. Approximately 29,102 special education teachers were needed during the 1989-90 school year to replace uncertified staff and to fill vacancies (Fourteenth Annual Report to Congress, 1991). Krause (1993) reported that, nationally, about 26,000 special education jobs are vacant, without qualified applicants to fill them.

Not only is there a severe shortage of special education personnel, but many of those currently working in the field are leaving. Gallagher (1993) noted that special education teachers are leaving the field in alarming numbers, with Bowen (1988) reporting that the numbers are twice that of teachers in general education. Boe (1990) suggested that attrition is the major contributor to the personnel shortage problem in special education.

These statistics have staggering implications for the issue of special education personnel recruitment and retention, yet the issue is a complicated one with many factors impacting on the availability of needed personnel. Colleges

and universities can only train those individuals who enroll in their programs, so recruitment and marketing of the profession is a factor. Training programs themselves are subject to many limitations and restrictions that may make them unattractive to prospective students, so flexibility is a factor. After completing training, many special education personnel move to other states, so incentives (salary, working conditions, etc.) are a factor. And, finally, after working for a while many special educators experience burn-out and leave the profession, therefore, adequate professional support is a factor.

Overlaying these factors are such issues as the uneveness of the shortage problem with some categories adequately staffed and others woefully understaffed, and the acuteness of the problem in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. Lauritzen (1988) observed,

> The low incidence handicapping conditions (visually impaired, hearing impaired, and severely handicapped) face unique problems in securing qualified teachers. The geographic isolation of the majority of these programs limits the availability of teachers who are restricted by commitment. The problem cannot simply be resolved by preparing more teachers for these fields unless these new trainees have some tie to the area needing teachers. The answers to resolving the teacher shortage in low incidence areas are far more complex than in the high incidence conditions (p. 5).

All of these factors blend together to make personnel shortages in special education a unique and highly complex challenge.

Lauritzen also noted two major factors affecting personnel shortages in special education. He identified the large yearly decline in the number of special educators being prepared as the most significant factor. The second most important factor is the relatively high attrition rate of special educators as compared to general educators.

The reasons why special educators leave the profession is a complicated one that has been investigated by a number of writers (Bogenschild, Lauritzen, & Metzke, 1988; Cross, 1987; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989) with stress levels being identified as a major factor (Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Holland, 1982). Other writers have concluded that there are numerous reasons why special education personnel do not remain in their positions (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Dangel, Bunch, & Coopman, 1987; Darling-Hammond, 1984, Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993).

What all of this research suggests is that the issue of personnel recruitment and retention in special education is a highly complex problem that is not easily solved. It requires a solution that addresses many factors and dimensions and requires the efforts of all those individuals impacted by the problem.

A Conceptual Framework

Over the course of the past 8 years a number of groups and committees have formulated ideas and suggestions to solve the problem of special education personnel recruitment and retention in Illinois. As a result of these efforts many excellent recommendations have been generated. While these recommendations have been extremely helpful, the problem has been the lack of a mechanism for implementing, coordinating, and facilitating these ideas. If the issue of special education personnel recruitment and retention is to be successfully addressed, a system of concentrated, coordinated planning and implementation must be put into place and operationalized. Figure 1 illustrates five elements that should characterize a system designed to address the issue of personnel recruitment and retention in special education. These elements, described in detail on the following pages, are essential to the successful operation of such a system.

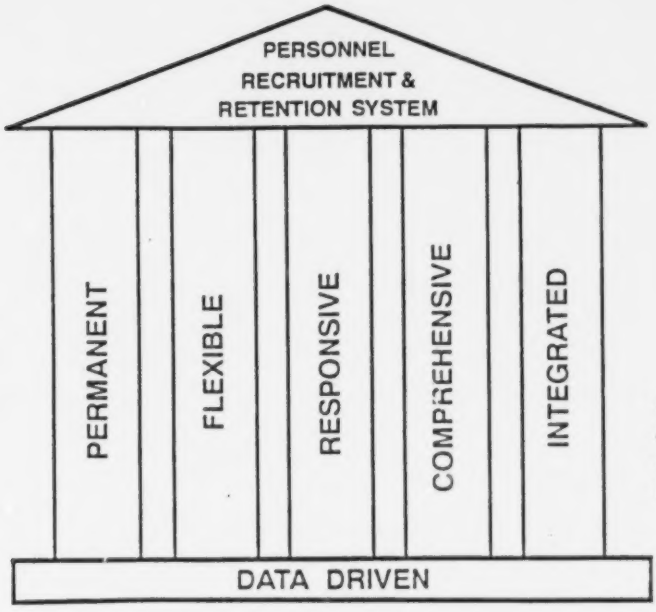

Figure 1:
A conceptual framework for a System of Special Education Personnel Recruitment and Retention

Data Driven

Fundamental to any effective personnel recruitment and retention system is information. It is the foundation upon which the system rests. Before appropriate strategies can be developed and implemented it is essential that they be based on reliable data regarding the amount and type of shortages present. A reliable system of data collection and analysis shapes and drives the process of personnel recruitment and retention. Among the types of data needed are;

a. the discrepancy between supply and demand of special education staff,
b. The amount of shortages by personnel category,
c. The number of special education staff trained by institutions of higher education (IHE's),
d. The number of special education staff leaving the field,
e. The reasons why special educators leave the field,

f. Evaluation results regarding the effectiveness of various types of strategies and techniques for personnel recruitment and retention.

There must be a mechanism in place and operating to collect this information, analyze it, and provide it in an understandable format to those who will be using it to plan activities and strategies.

Permanent

An effective system must also be designed to give consistent and continuous focus to the issue of personnel shortages. Far too often problems are given a one-shot treatment where a group or a committee comes together for the period of a few months, issues a report, and then dissolves. The problem of personnel shortages in special education will require a long-term solution. A short-term, or quick fix approach may address some of the more critical aspects of the problem, but will not provide the type of strong, indepth attention and focus that is needed.

A system must be in place which will guide and give support to efforts addressing special education personnel shortages. Once the system and its various activities are established, the success of that system will depend, largely, on its staying power. The factors influencing personnel recruitment and retention in special education have developed over an extended period of time, and it will take time to address them successfully. The temptation to opt for a fast solution at the expense of a lasting one must be avoided. Long after the initial excitement and anticipation have faded, the system must still be in place, actively and effectively pursuing its objectives. Those involved with, and impacted by, personnel recruitment and retention need to know that the system will be around to follow through and support activities and strategies that have been initiated.

Flexible

Any system that is successful in addressing personnel shortages must also be flexible. The requirements of the system will change frequently as will the types of techniques/strategies needed, and the available resources and opportunities. A successful system will have the capability of adjusting its structure and activities as needed.

Flexibility means that when activities are not successful in addressing the problem, they are changed and adapted as necessary in order to reach the objectives. A system that continues to employ the same techniques and strategies when they have proven to be ineffective will not be very useful. This is especially true with an issue as complex as special education personnel shortages.

Responsive

Closely related to flexibility is the element of responsiveness. A successful system of recruitment and retention must respond quickly to changing needs and demands. In this regard the system must rely heavily on its data system to supply valid information on which to build strategies and activities. The system must also be responsive to unique and localized needs, as well. To treat the entire state the same without giving attention and leadership, when needed, to very specific issues and problems will drastically reduce the usefulness of the system. Often opportunities and problems arise that are unanticipated and the system must have the ability to respond quickly and effectively in those situations.

Comprehensive

Because personnel recruitment and retention is a complex issue it requires a focus and an approach that is comprehensive, encompassing all dimensions. This comprehensive nature should operate on two levels:

1. First, every factor and issue impacting on personnel recruitment and retention should be addressed in the system. This includes marketing, advertising, training programs, certification, stress and burn-out, professional support, and so forth. To be successful the system cannot be one-dimensional, but should develop strategies and techniques to address the varied aspects of personnel shortages.
2. Second, the system should be comprehensive in terms of the individuals involved in its development and its ongoing implementation. All the various professionals who impact, or are impacted by, personnel recruitment and retention need to bring their varied and unique expertise, perceptions, and experiences to bear if the system is to be successful. Ownership of all stakeholders must be secured from the beginning and maintained in the implementation of the system. It is especially important to involve representatives in issues and activities that most affect and impact their particular professions and interests.

Integrated

Finally, an effective system of personnel recruitment and retention in special education must incorporate an integrated approach. While activities must be comprehensive in nature, those activities must not be disjointed and segmented. The system must be structured in such a way that each part supports and complements all the others. There must be clear and consistent communication across the system, and there must be the efficient and effective sharing of resources. Individual efforts to address specific issues impacting on personnel shortages are greatly reduced if they are not tied together effectively and linked to an integrated system. This means that planning and communication must be

done carefully so that all parts are in tune with the operation of the whole system.

The five elements discussed above form the framework for a system to address the complex issues involved in special education personnel recruitment and retention. By building upon these essential elements this paper proposes a plan to implement such a system in Illinois.

A Proposed System for Special Education Personnel Recruitment and Retention

Figure 2 illustrates a system of special education personnel recruitment and retention for Illinois that is designed around the conceptual framework discussed previously. In preparation for this paper the recommendations and ideas regarding personnel shortages in special education that were generated through previous efforts of the State Board of Education were analyzed. This analysis revealed four major areas into which most recommendations fall. These areas provide four general categories for recommendations. These four categories may be defined broadly as:

1. Data Collection and Analysis;
2. Marketing and Recruitment;
3. Training and Certification;
4. Professional Support and Enhancement.

As illustrated in Figure 2, these four areas form the spokes of the Personnel Recruitment and Retention System. These spokes, or components, will provide the major focus of activities and will give structure and guidance to the system.

The model proposed in Figure 2 will also establish a Task Force on personnel recruitment and retention to provide overall coordination, consistency, continuity, and communication to the system. The Task Force will have the responsibility for

guiding, monitoring, evaluating and modifying the Special Education Personnel Recruitment and Retention System. Operating under the auspices of the State Board of Education, the Task Force will come together on a regular basis to hear reports on the various activities regarding personnel recruitment and retention, evaluate the effectiveness of those activities, make recommendations regarding any needed modifications, and suggest new activities when appropriate.

Figure 2:
A System for Special Education Recruitment and Retention in Illinois

As illustrated by Figure 2, the Task Force will also establish work groups to address single issues such as certification, marketing, training, etc. In addition, there will also be a link with the state's Comprehensive System of Personnel Development for Special Education so that activities to address recruitment and retention will be coordinated with the CSPD plan. This interaction will be facilitated by the participation on the Task Fore by a CSPD committee member.

Also essential is a link with the Higher Education Advisory Council which is composed of representatives from colleges and universities in the state which have special education personnel training programs.

The System for Special Education Personnel Recruitment and Retention is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional system with many diverse components and activities operating on different levels and different timetables. Yet, at the same time, the system is drawn together through its focus on insuring adequate numbers of appropriate and well-trained special education personnel in the state. The following discussion delineates and describes the operation of the total system and how it relates to this focus. The model illustrated in Figure 2 will form the framework for this discussion.

Task Force

The Task Force will meet on a regular basis to develop, initiate and monitor activities. A staff assistant, either appointed from the State Board of Education staff or contracted from outside the agency, will provide ongoing coordination and administrative support to the Task Force. In its first few meetings the Task Force will clarify and develop a focus for those essential activities to be addressed in the four component areas of; Data Collection/Analysis, Marketing/Recruitment, Training/Certification, and Professional Support/Enhancement.

The Task Force will establish specific work groups to address these areas. Each work group will develop a detailed implementation plan, along with cost estimates, for each of these four areas. These detailed implementation plans will be submitted to the State Board of Education for adoption and funds are allocated. Where appropriate, these implementation plans will become specifications for

contracts to implement activities. To provide consistent communication and coordination, each work group will be chaired by a member of the Task Force. This will help insure that the activities of the various work groups are integrated with, and built upon, the activities of other work groups.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Task Force's work group on data collection and analysis will develop an evaluation model for personnel recruitment and retention. This model will identify the types and sources of information needed to acurately project personnel needs in special education, and also to assess the effectiveness of personnel recruitment and retention efforts and to analyze reasons for personnel shortages (i.e. burn-out, leaving the state, inadequate preparation, etc.). Appropriate individuals will be asked to work with other agencies (i.e. certification department, IHE's, etc.) to identify sources of information, make recommended changes in data collection procedures and practices, and develop any needed forms. Contact will also be maintained with the NASDSE/CEC Clearinghouse on Professions in Special Education which is developing a conceptual framework for states to use in state data collection and reporting.

Once the model is established, it will be necessary to put in place a mechanism to maintain the system, and to provide timely analysis and distribution of data. This can be accomplished by writing a contract with an individual or agency, or by assigning the responsibilities to a State Board of Education staff member. A computer program will also be developed to analyze data and generate reports. Information collected through the procedures established by the work group will be entered into the computer on a regular basis with reports produced and disseminated throughout the year. The system should

also include a validity checking system to insure appropriateness and timeliness of information.

Marketing and Recruitment

There are three primary sources for recruitment of additional personnel for special education:

1) Teachers trained out of state;
2) Experienced teachers returning or transferring;
3) Teachers newly trained in-state.

The marketing/recruitment component of this system needs to address all three of these sources. The Task Force will establish a work group to devise specific strategies to market special education professions and recruit new staff members from the three sources described above. These strategies will include:

1) Brochures, videotapes, and other promotional items on special education professions in Illinois;
2) A Speakers' Bureau to address high school and college students;
3) A media campaign directed to specific geographic areas and to specific groups (i.e. displaced homemakers, bilingual, etc.);
4) Creative promotional programs designed to stimulate interest in special education professions;
5) Presentations at out of state conferences/conventions, etc.;
6) Scholarships and other incentives to select special education as a career option;
7) Programs to recruit staff from among paraprofessionals and education fields that have a surplus;
8) Incentives for special education graduates to remain in Illinois.

Activities should also focus on two aspects of encouraging individuals to pursue special education careers; academic and financial. Academic incentives can be provided by a support system to prospective special education personnel involving tutoring, counseling, academic advisement, and remedial assistance. Financial assistance can be provided through the development of a scholarship and loan program. One approach may be to implement a forgivable loan program where part of the loan would be forgiven if the individual taught in a personnel shortage area in Illinois for a given period of time. This could also be directed at rural areas which have a difficult time attracting personnel.

In addition, recruitment efforts should be implemented early in high school to interest prospective college students in special education as a career. High school students could be involved in part-time employment in working with children with disabilities, coupled with support organizations, scholarships, and guaranteed employment in Illinois upon graduation from college.

The work group's job will be to determine what specific strategies and techniques would be effective in marketing special education professions and in recruiting special education staff. It may be necessary for this work group to involve other individuals for specific purposes (for instance to address bilingual special education teachers or occupational therapists, etc.), some strategies and techniques will vary according to the particular shortage being addressed. It might be advisable, also, for the work group, based on the data available, to target two or three specific types of position categories each year and develop a marketing/recruitment plan for just those positions (i.e. bilingual special education, occupational therapists, etc.).

Once a detailed plan has been developed, a contract will be awarded to an

individual or organization to implement, coordinate and monitor all activities associated with the marketing/recruitment plan. A key ingredient in this component will be the ability to operate aggressively. For instance, in regard to a Speakers' Bureau it will not be enough to simply send out information to let interested parties know of its existence and availability. Someone will need to call and initiate speaking appointments and presentations for members of the Bureau.

Training/Certification

The task of the Training/Certification component is to balance the need for flexibility and speed in training and certification with the need to provide high quality, appropriately trained staff for special education positions. The first goal of the Task Force, then, will be to establish a work group to study existing certification policies, standards and practices to determine if they meet these criteria. Any needed changes should be put in the form of a set of specific recommendations to the State Board of Education. These recommendations should be addressed and final action to implement, reject, or modify each recommendation should be made by the State Board of Education within one calendar year.

As certification issues are addressed, another work group should be established on training. Working in concert with the data collection/analysis component, this work group will identify the specific issues affecting the training of special education staff. In particular, this work group should analyze the number of training programs, the various requirements of existing training programs, and the flexibility (or lack thereof) in existing training programs.

The work group will then develop training programs/models that would

supplement and complement existing training programs in the state. It will be necessary to negotiate and work with IHE's and other training providers in the state to customize training programs to fit the needs identified above.

The outcome of this particular component should be a comprehensive training system in the state to provide for the personnel needed. A possible product could be a handbook that lists all of the possible training options in the state, who provides them, and the requirements of each program. This would be a valuable resource to prospective special education personnel and to administrators.

A key ingredient in this component's success will be its ability to be creative, flexible, and quick to respond to emerging and immediate training needs. One way to facilitate this is to establish a regionalized network of training providers, with a steering committee appointed for each region. In this way training could be developed that incorporated the needs and the available resources that are unique to different areas of the state.

Professional Support/Enhancement

It is not very effective to increase the state's ability to recruit and train special education personnel if many of them do not remain in the field. For this reason, the Professional Support/Enhancement component is very important. An essential link to this component is the Data Collection/Analysis component. There must be a reliable, timely source of information regarding the type of professional support and enhancement that special education staff need. It will do no good to provide programs that do not meet those needs.

It is suggested that an annual needs assessment be coordinated through the CSPD committee in conjunction with the Data Collection and Analysis work

group to determine appropriate activities for support and career enhancement of specified special education personnel. Building upon this, a work group composed heavily of special education staff from the state, should annually develop a program of professional support and enhancement activities for special education staff. It is important that this program be formalized, marketed and publicized in order to reap maximum benefits.

This program should also be comprehensive, flexible, and creative. It can be comprehensive by addressing every area of need that is revealed by the needs assessment process. Specific activities for each need would not be necessary, however, provisions for initiating activities to address each need should be a part of the program. Flexibility comes into play when considering the individualization of the program. To administer the program centrally, on a statewide basis, would not be very practical or desirable since it would not allow the program to be sufficiently responsive to localized needs. Therefore, it is recommended that a network be established to design local support and enhancement activities.

Finally, creativity is essential to the Support/Enhancement component if it is to be more than simply another series of tired, worn-out workshops. The work group that designs the action plan for this component should incorporate innovative and non-traditional methods of providing professional support and career enhancement to special education personnel. Some of the methods that should be included in the plan are:

1) A Teacher-Helping-Teacher network;
2) A Resource Bank of college and university faculty members to address specific issues, topics or problems;

3) A faculty exchange program with local colleges and universities;

4) A staff exchange program where school district staff exchange jobs with staff in other types of positions within the district;

5) The involvement of local business and community leaders in working with special education staff;

6) Structured sabbaticals for teachers;

7) Internships;

8) Mentorships;

9) Continuing education programs;

10) Model Classrooms/Schools.

Conclusion

Insuring an adequate supply of appropriately trained personnel to meet the needs of students with disabilities is a complex problem and one with which regular and special educators across the country are struggling. If a successful solution is to be found it will require consistent and comprehensive communication and collaboration among professionals at all levels. Timely and reliable data, along with a system that is flexible and responsive, are essential elements in effectively addressing this important issue.

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